USCA

VOC FOR IOP/FE
BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0720 MAY 5, 1976
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CHINA AND THE LAW OF THE SEA

ANNCR:

DELEGATES FROM THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AT THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE LAW OF THE SEA ARE SAID TO BE TAKING AN ACTIVE PART IN THE PROCEEDINGS. VOA'S JOSEPH KUN HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT ON PEKING'S VIEWS ON THE ISSUES INVOLVED.

VOICE:

CHINA'S INTEREST IN THE QUESTIONS BEING DEBATED AT THE LAW OF THE SEA MEETING IS UNDERSTANDABLE. IT'S COASTLINE EXTENDS SOME FOURTEEN THOUSAND KILOMETERS -- FROM KOREA IN THE NORTH TO THE INDOCHINA PENINSULA IN THE SOUTH. CHINA'S MARITIME FISHING FLEET IS GENERALLY RANKED AS FOURTH IN SIZE IN THE WORLD. AND, TO THE EXTENT THAT CHINESE FISHING BOATS OPERATE PREDOMINANTLY IN WATERS CLOSE TO CHINA'S SHORELINE, PEKING IS UNDERSTANDABLY INTERESTED IN PROTECTING ITS COASTAL FISH RESERVES.

PEKING ALSO HAS REASON FOR WANTING JURISDICTION OVER THE EXPLOITATION OF ITS CONTINENTAL SHELF. CHINESE OIL DRILLING RIGS HAVE FOR SOME TIME NOW BEEN OPERATING IN THE PO HAI GULF, WHICH PETROLEUM EXPERTS BELIEVE HOLDS HUGE UNDERSEA OIL RESERVES.

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA BECAME A MEMBER OF THE UNITED NATIONS SEABED COMMITTEE IN 1972. AND SINCE THEN ITS POSITION ON LAW OF THE SEA ISSUES HAS BEEN ENUNCIATED LARGELY IN CHINESE MEDIA COVERAGE OF SEABED COMMITTEE MEETINGS AND STATEMENTS MADE THERE. PEKING HAS GIVEN

HEAVY ATTENTION TO THE QUESTION OF TERRITORIAL SEA LIMITS AND TO THE SO-CALLED "EXCLUSIVE ECONOMIC ZONES." IT DEFENDS THE RIGHT OF COASTAL STATES TO DETERMINE THE LIMITS OF THEIR TERRITORIAL SEAS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THEIR SECURITY AND NATIONAL ECONOMIC INTERESTS. THE CHINESE HAVE ALSO SUPPORTED GOVERNMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA AND AFRICA WHICH CLAIM VIRTUAL SOVEREIGNTY OVER TERRITORIAL WATERS EXTENDING TO TWO HUNDRED MILES. THIS POSITION IS PERHAPS EXPLAINED BY THE FACT THAT CHINA'S OWN FISHING FLEETS RARELY VENTURE ONTO THE HIGH SEAS AND CERTAINLY NOT INTO THE TERRITORIAL WATERS OF COUNTRIES REMOTE TO CHINA.

PEKING HAS ALSO DEFENDED THE RIGHTS OF NATIONS WHOSE LAND AREAS BORDER ON INTERNATIONAL STRAITS TO IMPOSE SPECIAL NAVIGATIONAL REGULATIONS ON PASSAGE THROUGH THESE STRAITS. AMONG OTHER THINGS, THE CHINESE HAVE ENCOURAGED THE COASTAL STATES TO DEMAND PRIOR NOTIFICATION OF THE PASSAGE OF FOREIGN NAVAL VESSELS THROUGH INTERNATIONAL STRAITS. IN THE SHORT TERM, AT LEAST, RESTRICTIONS ON PASSAGE THROUGH INTERNATIONAL STRAITS WOULD NOT RESTRICT THE OPERATIONS OF THE CHINESE NAVY, WHICH IS STILL OF ONLY MODEST SIZE AND WHOSE WARSHIPS OPERATE ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY IN CHINESE WATERS. ON THE OTHER HAND, WITH A FAST-GROWING MERCHANT FLEET, PEKING HAS IN THE PAST UNDERSTANDABLY INSISTED ON THE RIGHT OF "INNOCENT PASSAGE" FOR ITS MERCHANT SHIPS.

JS/PY